



Nationalism, Ethnicity, and China's Go West Strategy

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Today China is suffering from four kinds of inequalities; economic, gender, rural-urban, and ethnic. The question of ethnic inequality and its politics in contemporary China has become a subject of great significance and of grave consequence in a context where the politics of identity of the ethnic minority communities has emerged as a powerful counter discourse vis-à-vis the rising Han majoritarianism. In her presentation Dr. Ravini Takur examined “China’s Go West Strategy” and its implications in the larger political context of ethnicity by historically locating the discourses of Han nationalism and its discursive aspect of social stratification.

In her presentation Dr Ravini traced the basis of Han ethnic nationalism to Sun Yat Sen’s definition of race (*Minzu*), in a nation that he sought to define as different from the erstwhile Manchu-ruled China. The Manchus, who were an ‘external’ dynasty, incorporated minorities under their overlordship by conceptualising the empire as divided into five parts under one sovereign. The five identified minorities were usually mentioned in official state edicts. Further, the Manchus were the longest reigning dynasty in Chinese history, which clearly suggests that they must have been “doing something right” in their approach to minorities.

The early reformist discourse of the late 19th centuries and early 20th century was heavily informed by social Darwinism. Japan also played an important role in shaping Chinese national identity and discourse during this period. Sun Yat-sen was certainly a product of this school. The attempt to modernise the nation was also identified as an anti-Machiu struggle, as they were identified as the group who along with Western exploitation were responsible for one hundred years of subjugation and who had brought China to its current perilous situation. At this point national discourses about identity were shaped by the intelligentsia and the elite.

With the advent of the communists, a different world view came into play. The position adopted by the Soviet Union and further by the Comintern on conquered territories did influence initially, but the CCP’s understanding of nationalism under Mao was grounded on the class analysis of China, and preferred homogeneity over diversity. The CPC moved away from the idea of *Minzuzhuyi* to *Aiguozhuyi*. The overarching idea of the love of the nation was supposed to incorporate the notions of diversity and the like.

The Manchus had tributary relationships with minorities, but it was only during the 18th and 19th centuries that Tibet and Xinjiang were incorporated into the administrative setup. There had been no Manchu interference with the internal governance of these parts of the empire. The CCP had wholly a new discourse. Mao hoped to create a completely new Chinese society, and his conception of the society as a 'blank page' did include a minority discourse. However, the CCP very much subscribed to the constitutional progress discourse, and in 1949 re-took both Tibet and Xinjiang (which had declared independence in the interim) in military campaigns. The west was seen as China's 'revolving door', and thus complete independence or even a loose relation with the center could not be seen as viable options. The scholar Andrew Nathan understands *Aiguozhuyi* as the integrative nation, and thus the progressive model of equality is still the crux of the China's approach to the region. It appears to be more aggressive in Tibet, where the dominant administrative and functional discourse is that of the 'developmentalist' national discourse. Dr. Thakur argues that this is the pragmatic model and incorporates policies such as reservation at the constitutional level. The concept of 'Han nation' was not at work before 1989. In fact, originally there was no direct relation between the state and the Han nation, the link was made only after 1989 when the CCP had to regenerate its relationship with the intelligentsia and the elite. The 1980s was the most intellectually dynamic period and there was freedom and space for critical discourse. The search for a post-Mao Chinese ideal was reflected institutionally in critical discussions about democracy and feminism. A shift was noticeable in the post-1989 period, where the CCP used force and set limits to critical discourse. Deng Xiaoping had followed the 'open-close door' policy and things have not changed much since. The CPC firmly identified itself as a nationalist party. Internally, the shifts from Maoism to reformism have now culminated in the party positioning itself as more and more Han. The CCP, of course, has what might be called 'manufacturing rights' over discourse in China.

The nationalist discourse today is that of a popular culturalist nation. The young generation in China takes pride of country's economic success. In the course of extensive interviews conducted by the speaker, it was found that the Chinese appear to be touchy on most issues and unfortunately would not brook any sort of criticism. After the 2008 Olympic Games, the youth entirely bought into the "splittist" perspective leveled at minorities, believing that these elements worked against a greater Chinese glory. Such views are especially visible and vehement on the internet. The Han sites are indicative of the source of many debates, such as recent responses over the novel *Wolf Totem*. The novel itself claims to examine the role of the steppes in the rejuvenation of China. The responses to this novel have been couched in the binaries of ethnic vs. heartland, and are indicative of the contours of national debate today.

In the present age, there is large scale Han migration to the frontier regions. This has resulted in two phenomena: a change in the internal demography of the regions, and the strategy of resource extraction and resource allocation. The Han is prioritised for investments and business, and this is especially visible in Kashgar, which has also been the site of the most disturbances. Kashgar is still 60% Uighur, as opposed to places like Urumqi, which is 93% Han today. The speaker in her interviews was able to analyse Han anxieties about minorities more than minority anxiety about the majority, simply because of the paucity of source; in this case, people, quite literally. Urumqi is also very much a police city, and the Uighur live in the small, old town in the city. Their market places are subject to constant checking, and no photography of course, is allowed. Both in Tibet and in Urumqi, the soldiers and policemen are very young, and they are drafted for service as such. The speaker postulates that the age factor may result in quicker and more drastic reactions on both sides.

Chinese minorities are increasingly becoming isolated, and they are not usually part of the economic development of the region. They remain farmers or small agriculturalists. Han migrant labor is used for construction works, for example, even prison labor might be preferred for hard labor construction. This is visible in Tibet for any sort of resource extraction, and in Xinjiang for the oil and cotton industries. Tourism is also a growing industry, and to accommodate tourists innovative ideas may be employed such as turning old buses into hotel rooms, but in all this development, the locals are visibly missing. The ethnic populations are experiencing a severe loss of identity and cultural politics have not changed with development.

In Xinjiang, the situation is definitely much more uncompromising. China seeks to rule with a strict, hard fist, and as a result the region is getting more radicalised. The East Turkestan Liberation Front has been classified by the SCO countries as a Terrorist organisation. Rebiya Kadeer favors an older Turkish style of politics, and that discourse is very much one of independence. Discussions within the intelligentsia reveal concern with ideas of citizenship and the acknowledgement that minorities need more space. The state has responded adversely with measures such as increasing arrests of Human Rights lawyers.

The relationship between the Han Chinese and Tibet is getting further complicated, especially since the Tibetan response has not included hitting back at the Han. There is no perceived physical threat, and the spates of self-immolations are causing guilt. Whereas the ‘troubling elements’ usually face death in Xinjiang, in Tibet they are most often incarcerated instead. Tibet is certainly complicating the ‘moral issue’. The intelligentsia abhors the idea of self-immolations, and at this juncture in time, China is witnessing a return to traditional ideologies such as Confucianism and Buddhism. The cultural capital of the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader complicates the Tibet problem.

Following issues were discussed during the Q&A:

□ □The speaker does not really envision a solution, but states that China needs to share its wealth with the minorities, who are now minorities in their own country. There can be no resolution unless the minorities can be made participants in development, and this is not likely in the current situation. Dr. Thakur argues that China needs a more open approach to resolving the class and economic differences in Tibet and Xinjiang, where the Tibetans are poor and the Han usually well-off. The speaker concluded with stating that China’s westward policy will only go forward and that this has an important impact for India. India should invest in infrastructure in the region, and engage in multilateral initiatives with Central and South Asian countries rather than trying to stop China. The speaker was asked if it is accurate to term most incidents “terrorist” incidents when the weapons used were only knives. They can perhaps be called “counter terrorist incidents”

□ □The speaker was asked how the term “pragmatic nationalism” might be defined when majority dealings with minorities were clearly less innovative.

□ □The speaker was asked if it was true that all policies ultimately only helped the Han. If it was, where did the fault lie—was it more the ineffective implementation of policy? The questioner stated that it was a dubious claim that policies were conceptualised as intending to only benefit the Han.

□ □The speaker was asked if she agreed that development was being implemented not so much to develop the area but to colonise it through a sort of demographic colonisation. The questioner further commented that self-immolations were rife in Amdo and Kham areas that China officially says do not form part of Tibet.

□ □The speaker was asked if the local Han population in the frontier regions was helping China as the “third force”; as an extension of the army or police. The questioner based this on having seen a picture of a local Han mob carrying the same batons as the Chinese police.

- □The speaker was asked if it might be argued that the tensions she spoke of were issues located in the tension between the transitions from the nation to the state. The same tensions are visible in progressive nationalism and can be seen in the criticism of small nation chauvinism, which is responsible for the autonomy of the cultural rights of minorities.
- □The speaker was asked if she saw nationalism as an ideology that was incapable of reconciling authority with culturalism, communism, or development, and if it is this difference that cannot allow better relations with minorities.
- □The speaker was asked if, in light of the fact that Buddhism is gaining popularity as an institution in modern China, and in light of the wider discourse of Tibet, the trajectory of minority relations is as implacable as she argued, or could there be nuances.
- □The speaker was asked if she saw a contradiction in ethnic policy when states developed regions to benefit minorities but find that subsidiary policies might undermine the intent. How do governments then go about addressing the problem?
- □The speaker was asked if she felt that there was an increase in discontent among minorities, especially now, since the policies appear more aggressive.
- □The speaker was asked to elaborate on India's action about China's go-west policy.
- □The speaker was asked if the incidents of self-immolations were increasing.
- □The speaker was asked if she thought the party state was entirely monolithic or are there groups emerging internally. If they are, what resistance might they face from the Han?
- □The speaker was asked if the demographic debate might at times appear polarising and conspiratorial.
- □The speaker was asked to elaborate on the Chinese government's response to critics of populations transfer.
- □The speaker was asked why, after six decades of Chinese rule, were there no employable Tibetans in Tibet.

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